

ABHIDHAMMA

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An article to the entry "Abhidhamma, Southern"
with short glossary entries on "Anicca", "Dukkha", "Anatta", "Dhamma", "Kamma", "Vipassanā"
written for Springer's Encyclopedia of Sciences and Religions, published in 2013

The final publication is available at <http://link.springer.com/referencework/10.1007/978-1-4020-8265-8>
(The structure and sub-titles were mandatory. General reference numbers in [] see at the end.)

Description

Abhidhamma (Pāli) [1, 2] is the third division or basket (*piṭaka*) of the *Tipiṭaka* or Pāli canon, the foundation of Theravāda Buddhism. While similar, slightly different kinds of Abhidharma (Sanskrit) belong to the various Mahāyāna traditions or to the Hinayāna schools, the latter having perished already. "Abhidhamma" literally means the higher or special teaching (of the Buddha). It is a huge collection of systematically arranged, tabulated and scientifically classified teachings of the Buddha, representing the quintessence of his teachings, timeless and independent of culture, race and gender. Abhidhamma is the Buddhist philosophy, describing the reality and truth completely. Abhidhamma is also the Buddhist psychology, dealing mainly with mental phenomena and explaining in detail how the mind works and how it can be liberated.

In the discourses (*sutta*) the Buddha takes into consideration the intellectual level of his audience, their development of the perfections (*pāramī*), their attainments and the specific situation. He therefore teaches the Dhamma in conventional terms and relative concepts (*paññatti*), referring to persons and objects as I, he, she, man, woman, cow, tree, etc. In the Abhidhamma, however, the Buddha does not make such concessions, but is treating the Dhamma entirely in terms of the ultimate reality (*paramattha*). All phenomena are analysed into their ultimate constituents (*dhamma*) which are precisely defined, classified and systematically arranged. Then, the laws of interaction between the dhammas are taught, their synthesis - a net of conditionality.

The Abhidhamma Piṭaka [3] consists of seven books:

1. Dhammasaṅgaṇī – Enumeration of the dhammas, "Buddhist Psychological Ethics"
Description of the fundamental, ultimate mental and physical phenomena constituting human experience.
2. Vibhaṅga – "The Book of Analysis"
Exposition of the analysis in the Dhammasaṅgaṇī in form of a catechism with many references in Suttanta.
3. Dhātukathā – "Discourse on Elements"
Description of the eighteen elements in sets of questions and answers. Similar substance like Dhammasaṅgaṇī and Vibhaṅga.
4. Puggalapaññatti – "A Designation of Human Types"
Description of the qualities of individuals and personality types. By differentiation, suitable teachings and meditation-subjects can be given individually.
5. Kathāvatthu – "Points of Controversy"
Collection of questions and orthodox answers in order to show superiority and distinguish Theravāda from other schools (compiled by Moggaliputta Tissa in the 3rd century B.C.).

6. Yamaka – “The Book on Pairs”

Twisted and vice-versa Abhidhamma questions and answers for deep understanding.

7. Paṭṭhāna – The Book of Conditions or “Conditional Relations”

Explanation of the 24 forces working between cause or condition and effect. Describing the laws of interaction of the dhammas analyzed in Dhammasaṅgaṇī, this is the great synthesis.¹

Self-Identification

Science

Abhidhamma, which presents itself very abstract, profound, logical and scientific, should not be looked upon as all theory and pure scholasticism. Abhidhamma stems from empirical knowledge of the Buddha which he acquired by his full enlightenment. It describes the full range of knowledge, insight and human experience with all and everything. Studying Abhidhamma can be compared with studying a map; but the map has to be used, one has to travel in order to reach the destination or, rather, to achieve one’s goal. Abhidhamma alone is just abstract science. It has to be applied in daily life and meditation.

Religion

Abhidhamma is to some extent religion in which one is supposed to believe or have confidence in, as long as one has not yet experienced it oneself. But, the more one can prove by own experience with clear, sharpened mind, especially in Vipassanā meditation, the more confidence (*saddhā*) will arise in one’s mind. The Buddha himself did not talk of his teachings as religion, and encouraged and urged to accept and believe only what practically turns out as wholesome and beneficial for liberation. People turned the Dhamma into a religion called “Buddhism”. Buddhism, and especially Abhidhamma, has nothing to do with a creator god or a god responsible for our life and fate. To the contrary, Abhidhamma clearly explains about life, death, rebirth, *kamma* and its result, and all causality-conditionality. Therefore, it can be seen as a doctrine transcending death and giving its followers meaning in life, sense, guidelines and understanding.

Albert Einstein is ascribed to have said: “The religion of the future will be a cosmic religion. It should transcend a personal God and avoid dogmas and theology. Covering both the natural and the spiritual, it should be based on a religious sense arising from the experience of all things, natural and spiritual as a meaningful unity. If there is any religion that would cope with modern scientific needs, it would be Buddhism.”² – Most probably Einstein did not come into contact with Abhidhamma, which would have been a wonderful supplementation and enrichment.

Characteristics

While other religions have to be accepted because of a god, heavenly messenger or prophet, Buddhism and Abhidhamma are to be accepted and practiced only, if, when tested, lead to whole-

¹ See separate entry "Relations in Buddhism" (Paṭṭhāna)

² Quotation ascribed to Einstein according to: <http://www.spaceandmotion.com/Albert-Einstein-Quotes.htm>, referring to *Albert Einstein, The Human Side*, edited by Helen Dukas and Banesh Hoffman, Princeton University Press, 1954

some states, more happiness, calmness, serenity, mental peace and liberty.³ One follows according to one's own level of insight and understanding.

While traditions and religious teachings, including most of the Buddha's discourses (*sutta*), give practical guidelines and explanations to concrete persons in various, distinct circumstances, cultures and eras which might no longer be suitable for our present age and problem, Abhidhamma – with its ultimate realities (*dhmma*) – offers a complete, abstract picture, so that we can find our own answers for an ethical and wholesome life, for mental development, and for understanding the world and seeing things as they really are. All other religions and common philosophies rely on a soul or self (*atta*) in one way or another and follow personality belief either with eternity or annihilation views, while the Buddha taught non-self, soullessness (*anatta*) and Abhidhamma can be regarded as a huge compendium on *anatta*.

Relevance to Science and Religion

Abhidhamma explaining things and phenomena according to the experience of the fully enlightened Buddha, does not need a proof by science, but also does not fear science or any new results from research. There can never be a contradiction. Abhidhamma encourages scientific research and some modern Abhidhamma scholars and practitioners are interested in related sciences, like physics (especially quantum physics), neurology, psychology, modern ways of psychotherapy, and research in the field of meditation, psychosomatic diseases, and the working of brain, mind and memory.

Sources of Authority

There is the story or legend in the Theravāda tradition that states: Abhidhamma was first taught by the Buddha for three months in the seventh year after his enlightenment in *Tāvātimsā* heaven to deities including the Buddha's departed mother, who had been reborn there. Ven. Sāriputta, one of his main disciples and second in knowledge after the Buddha, had received a brief summary each day from the Buddha himself. Then, Ven. Sāriputta formulated and arranged what we call Abhidhamma today and taught it to a selected group of his monk-pupils, who were ready to grasp it. Sāriputta might be the real author indeed, since he is known through the *suttas* as a very analytical, sharp-minded person. His excellent knowledge and way of explanation was praised by the Buddha himself.

Modern Buddhologists, linguists and historians claim that the Abhidhamma is a later work. Traditional Buddhists deny this and maintain that at least the essence of the Abhidhamma goes back to the Buddha himself, while later rearrangements and rewording found in the books are of minor importance. All six Buddhist councils, the first was held just three months after the Buddha's death, up to the latest international council from 1954-1956 have re-examined, accepted and confirmed the Abhidhamma Piṭaka as authentic and correct. An exception is the fifth Abhidhamma book, Kathāvatthu, which definitely is more recent and was included during the third council under King Asoka in 246 B.C. [3]

Further, Abhidhamma is consistent with and does not contradict the Suttanta, but systematizes and explains the manifold contents of the *suttas* in greater detail.

³ Essence of the popular Kālāma Sutta, Collection of Gradual Discourses, AN III. 66

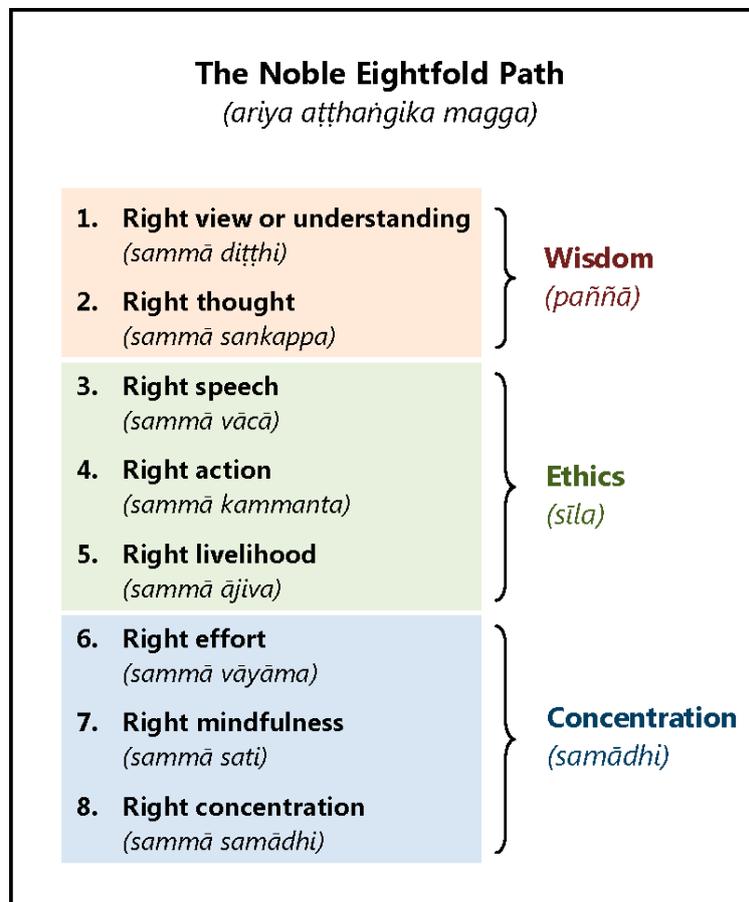
Last but not least, Abhidhamma gets its natural authority by being confirmed and proved true by generations of meditators according to their own experience.

Ethical Principles

Ethics and morality are the basics and foundation of Abhidhamma. Without an ethical lifestyle as foundation, no insight, attainment or realization is possible. In the Abhidhamma, all phenomena (*dhamma*) are classified according to their ethical qualities, which additionally have to be kammically wholesome in the sense of leading in the right direction toward goodness and liberation. The traditional system of classification of consciousness and mental states therefore differentiates between wholesome, unwholesome and kammically variable or neutral states. Abhidhamma always stresses their difference, their origination and their impact. Without blaming unethical persons or behaviours, without dos and don'ts, the Abhidhamma just teaches the abstract facts of these wholesome and unwholesome physical, verbal or mental actions. It is up to everyone which path to follow, ethical or unethical, but one should know the effects – not only for others but also for oneself. One who really understands and penetrates Abhidhamma will definitely train oneself and lead an ethical life.

Key Values

Key values according to Buddhism are ethics (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*), which together form the Noble Eightfold Path (*ariya aṭṭhaṅgika magga*) leading to the cessation of suffering.



Abhidhamma teaches all three values systematically and in the ultimate sense. Being a Buddhist psychology, Abhidhamma analyzes the connected mental states, the circumstances and conditions which lead to their arising, or, in the case of ethics, the right mental attitude and motivation in order to behave ethically.

Some factors of the Noble Eightfold Path, like concentration and effort can be either wholesome or unwholesome. The Abhidhamma offers criteria how to differentiate and decide, which one should be developed and which one should be abandoned.

The purpose of struggling and developing these values is the final goal of liberation, the attainment of *Nibbāna*. The way is shown as a step-by-step process through increasing insight and knowledge and by penetrating the realities or, rather, experiences, and through realizing them as impermanent (*anicca*), as suffering or unsatisfactory (*dukkha*), and as non-self or uncontrollable (*anatta*). The Abhidhamma aims specifically at the understanding of *anatta*.

Conceptualization

Nature/World

Abhidhamma has a realistic view. The world is made up of animate and inanimate things. According to the Abhidhamma, inanimate things such as mountains, rocks, trees, tables or books are made up of matter only, of various material qualities or physical phenomena (*rūpa*). Animate or living beings consist of mind and matter (*nāma rūpa*). These various mental and physical phenomena comprising beings and the world are taught in detail in their origination and relation in Abhidhamma. The conditional relations of phenomena, following natural laws, are seen in the interrelationship and dependence among beings and in the whole nature. Therefore, to care for the nature, for the environment and others will in turn lead to caring for oneself. Nature is not seen as perfect but because of its characteristic of impermanence (*anicca*), unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*) and non-self (*anatta*), nature belongs to the conditional world (*Saṃsāra*) and is tied to the endless cycle of arising and dissolving, of birth and death.

Human Being

A human being is mainly differentiated from other beings by its rebirth consciousness (*paṭisandhi citta*), which is a direct product of its previous wholesome kamma. The Abhidhamma describes 31 planes of existence in the world; only one is human, and only two, human and animal plane can be perceived by us. Productive *kamma* decides where and as what kind of being one is reborn. It is said as a human being one has the best chances for mental development and liberation, because there is much freedom in decision. In this plane, various types of *kamma* can ripen and produce results, usually a mixture of happiness and suffering is experienced that can motivate one to struggle and train the mind.

Life and Death

Life or a living being is characterized in the Abhidhamma by two phenomena called life faculty (*jīvitindriya*). [4, 5] There is physical life or physical vitality in the material groups, which has the function to protect the coexisting matters from rotting and decay. It is a direct and immediate product of *kamma* and makes the difference between the body of a living person and a human corpse. The other life phenomenon is mental or psychic life or psychic vitality, which is a mental

factor (*cetasika*) associated with all types of consciousness (*citta*) and various kinds of mental states. Its function is to protect the coexisting mental phenomena within the same mental unit for a certain tiny lifespan. The great majority of beings consist of mind and body, having both mental and material life. Some beings of the higher planes of existence consist of mind only, without bodies, having only mental life. Then, there is a rare unconscious being (*asaññasatta*) in higher planes of existence who has no mind but is made up of matter only, having at least material life.

How is it that there are all these different beings and types of life? They are all results of various and quite different *kamma* performed in previous lives. The higher planes and life without body, that is, only mind, or without mind, that is, only body, are reached through intense meditation, through attaining and mastering the various meditative absorptions (*jhāna*) and through special aspirations.

For the birth – or rather conception – of a human being three things have to coincide: Mother and father, that is, ovum and sperm need to be present and as main factor, a kammic impulse from a just departed being. The death of a being once again has to do with kamma. Death, that is the cutting off of the individual lifestream of a being, may happen because of four reasons according to the Abhidhamma:

1. End of lifespan (differs for species and in epochs)
2. End of kammic energy of the life-producing *kamma*
3. Case 1 and 2 together
4. A destructive *kamma* which intervenes and cuts off the energy of the life-producing *kamma*.

Death caused by case 1 to 3 is called timely death, while case 4 is called untimely death, which might happen even at young age by a fatal accident or a life-threatening disease.

The Abhidhamma gives minute explanations about the working of *kamma* and the mental death and rebirth processes. *Kamma* performed or remembered just before dying, has a great chance to produce the next life. In that way, Abhidhamma even proves the benefit of modern hospice work, by providing guidelines to relatives or nurses who accompany a dying person.

Reality

Abhidhamma is a science of reality or rather “realities”. First, there is the differentiation into conventional and ultimate reality or truth. In daily life we deal only with concepts (*paññatti*) which is essential in the field of ethics, lovingkindness (*mettā*), compassion, etc.

To see with Abhidhamma or “Vipassanā eyes” means to see the ultimate realities (*paramattha dhammas*) [6] behind the facade of concepts, and to penetrate through to their characteristics in order to let go, detach and liberate the mind.

Second, reality is twofold: Conditioned and unconditioned. Whatever phenomena, things, beings, states – they are all conditioned. The only unconditioned reality is *Nibbāna* (Sanskrit: *Nirvāna*).

Abhidhamma deals with ultimate reality, conditioned and unconditioned. [1] Ultimate realities are what really can be experienced by the six senses directly. The Abhidhamma distinguishes four ultimate realities:

1. Consciousness (*citta*)
2. Mental factors (*cetasika*)
3. Matter (*rūpa*)
4. *Nibbāna*

These four kinds of reality are again classified manifold. Abhidhamma enumerates 170 (or 202, if consciousness is classified into 121) different realities.

Reality according to Abhidhamma

Conditioned realities (<i>saṅkhata dhammā</i>)		Unconditioned realities (<i>asaṅkhata dhammā</i>)		
Conventional realities Conventional realities/concepts (<i>paññatti</i>) conventional truth (<i>sammuti sacca</i>)		Ultimate realities Ultimate realities (<i>paramattha dhammā</i>) or ultimate truth (<i>paramattha sacca</i>)		
<i>nāma-paññatti</i> name of a thing, phenomenon, person or being	<i>attha-paññatti</i> thing, person or being itself	<i>nāma</i> mind, mentality, mental / psychic phenomena	<i>rūpa</i> matter, body, corporeality, material / physical phenomena	<i>Nibbāna</i> 1. <i>kilesa-nibbāna</i> = <i>sa'upadisesa</i> <i>Nibbāna</i> 2. <i>khandha-nibbāna</i> = <i>anupadisesa</i> <i>Nibbāna</i>
Objects for <i>Samatha</i> meditation		Objects for <i>Vipassanā</i> meditation Universal characteristics: <i>anicca, dukkha, anatta</i>		Object in the enlightenment (<i>magga + phala</i>) Characteristic: <i>anatta</i>

These ultimate realities are ultimate in the sense that their characteristics do not change, whenever they are present, not that they are permanent themselves. For example, anger is not permanently with us, but whenever anger arises, it presents itself with the same typical distinguishing features. Each ultimate reality has its specific, individual characteristic, manifestation and function. Therefore, each reality is defined exactly and, in practical experience, can be distinguished clearly by a sharp, well-trained mind. Universal characteristics of all ultimate, conditioned realities are:

- impermanence (*anicca*),
- unsatisfactoriness or inherent suffering (*dukkha*),
- and non-self (*anatta*).

In contrast, *Nibbāna*, the only unconditioned reality, has the characteristics of permanence and satisfactoriness or happiness (*sukha*). Yet, as the conditioned phenomena, *Nibbāna* too has the characteristic of non-self (*anatta*).

Knowledge

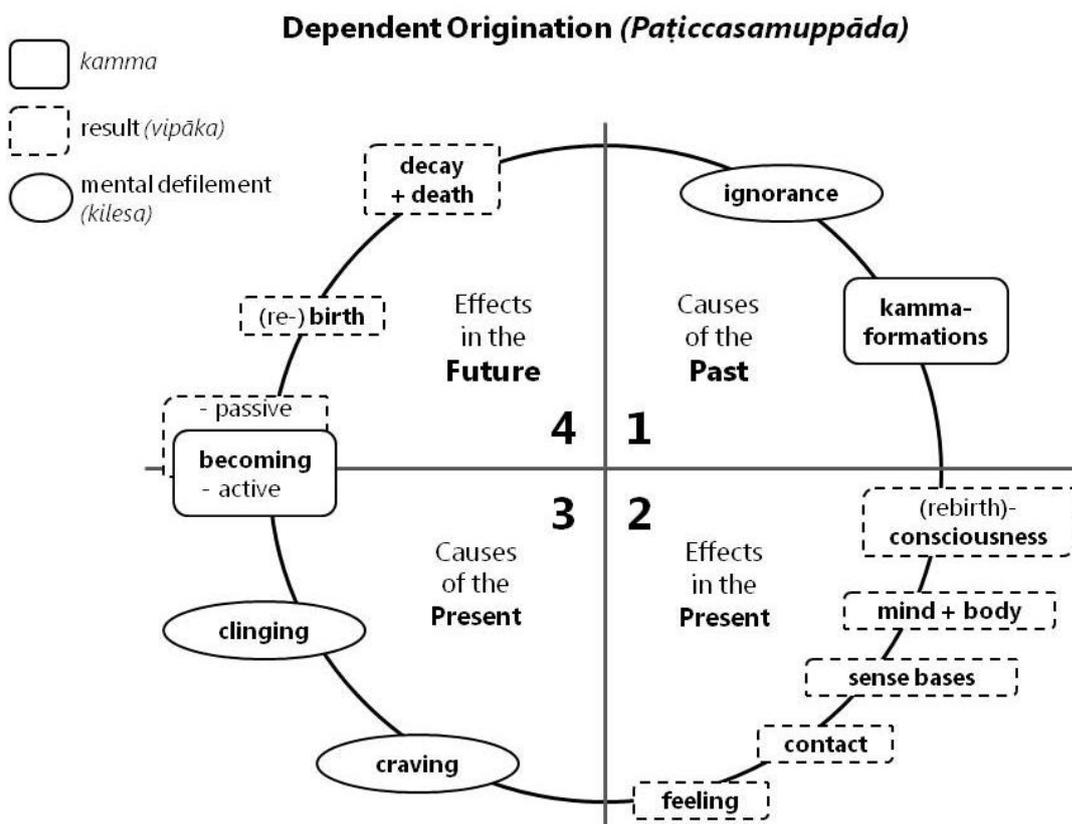
Different kinds of knowledge are differentiated in Abhidhamma [4, 5]: Knowledge by own thinking (*cinta mayā ñāṇa*), book knowledge or knowledge by listening (*anubodha-ñāṇa* or *suta mayā ñāṇa*), and direct knowledge by own, intuitive and penetrative insight (*paññā ñāṇa* or *bhāvanā mayā ñāṇa*), the latter being the most important and transforming knowledge, which includes insight knowledge (*Vipassanā ñāṇas*). Meditators have to go through these insight steps in order to attain *Nibbāna*. Only the Buddha himself is awarded omniscience (*sabbāññūtā-ñāṇa*).

Knowledge (*ñāṇa*) or wisdom (*paññā*) is one of the “beautiful” mental factors (*sobhana cetasikas*), which can associate only with wholesome and beautiful types of consciousness. It definitely should be developed and included in all actions. If knowledge is associated with beautiful mental factors, then the kammic quality of a wholesome action becomes stronger and better. Furthermore, in Abhidhamma we learn that only people with a kammically acquired rebirth consciousness associated with knowledge can attain meditative absorptions (*jhāna*) and may attain *Nibbāna*, that is, path and fruition consciousness (*magga* and *phala citta*).

Truth

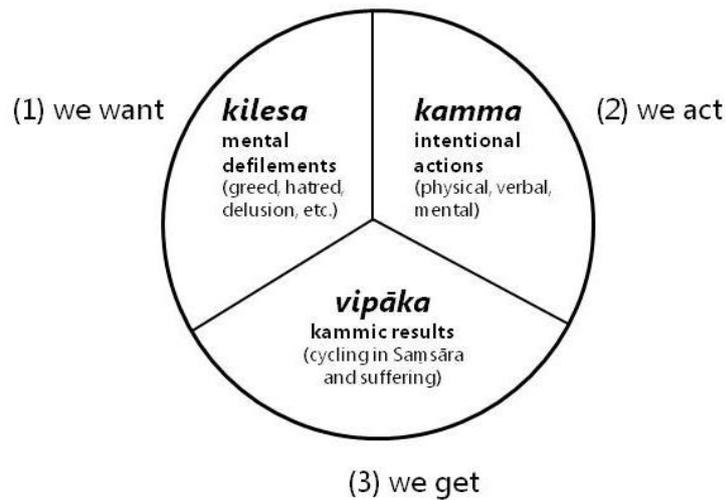
Truth is often mentioned in the same sense as reality. However, conventional and ultimate truth are differentiated. The Dhamma is attributed truthfulness (*svakhata*) and timelessness (*akalika*), that is, it is a teaching according to the truth, giving ever true replies to questions about suffering, its origin and its cessation, and describing solution of existential problems of past times as well as today.

Speaking about truth in Buddhism implies speaking about the Four Noble Truths, the quintessence of the Buddha’s teachings. They are explained in greater detail in the doctrine of Dependent Origination (*Paṭiccasamuppāda*) which is clearly explained in the Abhidhamma too. [3, 4, 5, 9]



The first noble truth of suffering is found in the second and fourth section of the circle comprising the phenomena conventionally called birth, decay, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, suffering and despair. In terms of ultimate truth, they are phenomena like resultant consciousness (*viññāṇa*), mind and matter (*nāma rūpa*), sense bases (*saḷāyatana*), contact (*phassa*) and feeling (*vedanā*), which are the kammic results (*vipāka*) that we have to face.

The second noble truth of the origin of suffering is found in the first and third section of the circle: Ignorance (*avijjā*) and kamma formations (*saṅkhāra*) are mentioned as past causes for suffering, craving (*taṇhā*), clinging (*upadāna*) and the active, kammic process of becoming (*kamma-bhava*). Indeed all these factors worked in past, work in present, and will work in future as a natural law – as long as we have not yet found and used the exit. In this way, *Paṭiccasamuppāda* explains *Samsāra*, the endless cycle of cause and effect of suffering. Summarizing it can be said: Kamma produces its results (*vipāka*) with the help of mental defilements (*kilesa*), like ignorance and craving. The way to stop suffering, that is, painful, undesirable results, is not to stop actions (*kamma*), but to eradicate the defilements (*kilesa*).



This cessation of suffering or the end of the cycle of *Samsāra* is *Nibbāna* – the third noble truth. And the path to achieve this practically is the noble eightfold path, which constitutes the fourth noble truth. These are fundamental truths in conformity with natural laws.

Perception

Perception (*saññā*) according to Abhidhamma [4, 5, 6, 9] is a universal mental factor (*cetasika*), that is, it associates with all types of consciousness. It is the awareness of an object's distinctive marks. If, through repeated perception of an object, these marks are recognized, *saññā* functions as memory. Sometimes *saññā* can mislead, if it compares a new, similar object with the memorized marks of a previous object.

Perception is sometimes used for the whole mental unit including consciousness. But still, an object cannot be fully perceived or known clearly by just one mind moment, one single unit of sense perception, which is conditioned by the sense organ and its corresponding object. Abhidhamma commentaries [4, 5, 7] explain, that at least four mental processes (*vīthis*) are necessary to be able to know and name the object which, for example, was seen in the first process only. Each process is made up by 17 or 12 mind moments respectively, following each other in fixed and reasonable series.

Usually people say and think: "I perceive" or "my self perceives this and that." Yet, according to Abhidhamma only bare processes are running, conditioned by certain circumstances. There is no perceiver, no observer, no creator, no soul or self behind it. Just impersonal processes devoid of I or self.

Time

Time is as concept that – according to Abhidhamma – is relative and is derived from changeability, impermanence and movement in phenomena. “Chronological time (*kāla*), denoted by reference to this or that event, is merely a conventional expression... Since it has no existence in itself, one has to understand it as a mere concept.”⁴ Albert Einstein puts it tersely: “Time is what one reads from the clock.”⁵ The measurement of time is possible only because of the movement of the hands relative to the clock’s face, or by marking events or certain states in changes: Birth and death; sunrise and sunset; appearance of a phenomenon and its disappearance. The shortest time span that can be defined according to Abhidhamma is the duration of one of the three submoments of consciousness: (1) The arising submoment, (2) the existence or standing submoment, and (3) the falling or vanishing submoment. All three together form one mind moment, i.e., the lifespan of consciousness. Seventeen times longer than that is the lifespan of matter.

In Abhidhamma and its commentaries, past, future and present time are defined precisely for the material and mental phenomena or the five aggregates (*khandhā*) respectively according to four points: Period of time (*addhā*), continuity of a process (*santati*), occasion (*samaya*) and moment (*khaṇa*).⁶ [9]

Concerning *Nibbāna*, the unconditioned reality, the concept of time becomes meaningless and cannot be applied.

Consciousness

Consciousness (*citta*) is one of the four ultimate realities in Abhidhamma. [1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9] It is that which is aware of an object or cognises the object. Consciousness always has an object; it might be a present sense object or a mental object, a thought or a memory.

Throughout life there is consciousness, one consciousness after the other without gap, but only one consciousness a time. Even when someone is “unconscious” like in coma or when fainted, a subtle, passive type of consciousness (*bhavaṅga*) is present. Therefore, it is spoken of a “stream of consciousness” which flows continuously according to its conditions from birth to death and continues in the next life (*citta santāna*); this continuous stream will cease only in the attainment of the final *Nibbāna*. This individual stream of consciousness follows a fixed, defined sequence as natural law (*citta niyāma*).

Consciousness does not arise alone, but always together with at least seven mental factors (*cetasika*), which together constitute the mind (*nāma*). Consciousness is compared to clean, clear water which cannot be seen. Only by added colours or dirt, water becomes visible. In the same way, consciousness can be perceived by its “colours” only – the mental factors (*cetasika*) – which arise simultaneously with the same object but with different characteristic and function.

According to the six senses as bases there are six types of consciousness:

1. Eye consciousness

⁴ Atthasālinī, §58-59, commentary by Buddhaghosa to Dhammasaṅgaṇī, the first of the seven Abhidhamma-books

⁵ Quotation ascribed to Einstein

⁶ Path of Purity (Visuddhimagga), XIV, §494 or §472/473 in most translations

second. [7] The duration of consciousness is measured by three short instants or submoments, characterizing distinct features:

1. Arising instant
2. Presence or existing instant
3. Dissolving instant

75 types of consciousness have the ability to produce matter (*rūpa*) at their arising instant.

If repeated many times, our body will move, communicate, change or may even suffer from psychosomatic diseases.

Rationality/Reason

Rationality is highly valued in Abhidhamma, which in itself is very logical, reasonable and rational. Once the definitions of the phenomena are fully understood – which is not easy, as there is no suitable and exact translation for some Pāli terms into English or another Western language which would cover the correct and full meaning – the structure and system are extremely logical and can be understood by mere intellect and reason. Yet, that is not the purpose of Abhidhamma. Abhidhamma is developed by experience and guides people through experiences and insights, and finally to liberation. Abhidhamma should not become an end in itself, but inspire to practise and apply.

Mystery

In Abhidhamma all is explained in detail and openly. Even the final goal, *Nibbāna*, is well declared. No secret remains, and no phenomenon that could not be defined and explained. For meditators without Abhidhamma background, experience in meditative absorptions (*jhāna*) beyond common sense experiences could easily be misunderstood as the goal or seem like a mystery that they cannot explain rationally and which they might misinterpret as divine appearance or unity with God.

Relevant Themes

Nibbāna (Sanskrit: *Nirvāna*) is the final goal of all Buddhists, but often they have the opinion, that *Nibbāna* is not possible to describe and explain. Surely, one cannot get or imagine the taste of something, of which one does not have any experience. However, Abhidhamma offers a description which can be grasped and understood intellectually, although one has not yet tasted it. [4, 5, 6]

Nibbāna literally means end of craving (*vāna*). As craving is the main cause for suffering (*dukkha*), which is already taught in the Four Noble Truths of the Buddha, the end of craving is the cessation of suffering, and that is *Nibbāna*. [6]

Nibbāna, deathlessness, the unconditioned, is an ultimate reality beyond impermanence and beyond suffering and even any latent suffering or unsatisfactoriness. *Nibbāna* is peace, is stillness, is neither coming nor going. There are two types of *Nibbāna* and they should be distinguished precisely. *Nibbāna* means extinguishing, fading away. The type of *Nibbāna* the Buddha had realized in his enlightenment, is *Kilesa Nibbāna*, the irreversible extinguishing of the mental defilements (*kilesa*). However, mind and matter still remain and follow their own processes. This type is called “*Nibbāna with rest*” (*sa-upādisesa Nibbāna*). In the other type of *Nibbāna* there is no rest, no remainings (*an-upādisesa Nibbāna*), and this is *Khandha Nibbāna*, characterized by the extinguishing of the five aggregates (*khandha*), that is, mind and matter.

The common saying “*Nibbāna* is the highest bliss” can be explained in various ways. While the mind takes *Nibbāna* as object, there is sublime happiness and peace. Also, having attained *Nibbāna*, the person experiences a great feeling of release and is filled with happiness, because one knows that one has attained it, and that there will be no more suffering and rebirth. However, the enlightened person still has body and mind which oppress one, and which are naturally bound to decay. Only the cessation of body and mind – even the good, happy states and emotions – is bringing total stillness and peace; that is the highest bliss indeed.

This final state is eloquently summarized in the Buddha’s famous phrase:

“Impermanent, alas, are all conditioned phenomena,
They have the nature of arising and decay,
Having been born, they vanish.
Their calming is true happiness.”⁷

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⁷ “*Aniccā vata saṅkhārā, uppāda vā dhammino, uppajjitvā nirujjhanti, tesam vūpasamo sukho.*” Dīghanikāya: Collection of Long Discourses, DN16 and DN17.

Glossary

Anicca - Impermanence

Anicca (Pāli) or *anitya* (Sanskrit) is impermanence or transitoriness. According to Buddhist Abhidhamma, all phenomena, physical and mental, are momentary and transient only, they arise and dissolve. This impermanence is defined in ancient texts:

“Not existing before, they (the phenomena) arise.
Having arisen, they vanish forever.”

Anicca is not the slow change in things which one can observe. It is the constant, rapid arising and immediate cessation of phenomena which can only be perceived by a well-trained, keen and sharp mind in *vipassanā* meditation. According to the ancient Abhidhamma commentaries, arising and vanishing takes place at a tremendous rate of more than a 1,000 billion times per eye-wink. In other words, the lifetime of phenomena is less than 1,000 billionth of a second.

In the Buddha’s teachings the transience and constant renewal of phenomena is compared with dew-drops at sunrise, a bubble on water, a line drawn on water, or a lightning flash.

Anicca is one of the three universal characteristics of existence, of all conditioned phenomena (*saṅkhāra*), or in Abhidhamma terms, of all ultimate realities (*paramattha-dhamma*) except *Nibbāna*. In *vipassanā*, to penetrate and realize *anicca* of one’s meditation-object as well as of one’s observing mind (the subject), is said to be definitely necessary on the step-by-step stages of the insight knowledge (*vipassanā-ñāṇa*) which leads to disenchantment, equanimity and final liberation of the mind.

The contemplation of impermanence (*aniccānupassanā*) is one of the three main methods in insight meditation. It discards the sign of perversion of permanence. *Nibbāna* appears through the signless aspect and practice leads to signless emancipation (*animitta-vimokkha*) with faith (*saddhā*) as gateway to liberation.

Dukkha - Suffering

Dukkha (Pāli) or *duhkha* (Sanskrit), a key term and truth in Buddhism, is usually translated as suffering. According to the context, *dukkha* is either direct suffering, being liable to suffering, a bodily painful feeling, or unsatisfactoriness, deficiency, insufficiency.

The Buddha declared suffering in the first Noble Truth: “Birth is suffering, old age, disease, death is suffering, to be united with unbeloved ones is suffering, to be dissociated from beloved ones is suffering, not to get what one wants is suffering, in short, the five aggregates of clinging are suffering.” [Dhammacakkappavattana-Sutta, Saṃyutta-Nikāya, S 56, 11] These types of suffering are evident, which all beings have to face; they are unavoidable. But the Buddha penetrated suffering and found its cause, which he taught in the second Noble Truth: Craving (*taṇhā*). The third Noble Truth declared the cessation of suffering by the complete end and liberation of craving. Finally, the fourth Noble Truth gives the practical way how to remove craving and be freed from suffering through following The Noble Eightfold Path.

Dukkha in the context of feeling (*vedanā*) denotes the bodily unpleasant or painful feeling. Altogether the Buddha taught five kinds of feelings, which should not be mixed up with emotions

which are already reactions to the primary feelings or sensations. If only three feelings are mentioned, *dukkha* represents unpleasant bodily as well as mental feelings, i.e., pain and unhappiness.

Dukkha is one of the three universal characteristics of existence. Here, and in the context of insight-meditation (*vipassanā*), *dukkha* is the unsatisfactory, imperfect, deficient and insufficient quality of all formations or conditioned phenomena (*saṅkhāra*), and of all worldly experiences too. The intuitive insight into this characteristic leads to detachment, disenchantment and turns the mind to the quest for *Nibbāna*, which alone does not have the quality of *dukkha*, but to the contrary, is highest bliss and true happiness. All phenomena have the intrinsic nature of *dukkha* according to the three types of *dukkha*:

1. *Dukkha-dukkha*: Some phenomena evidently are painful and suffering directly in themselves (such as headache, worry, anxiety, etc.)
2. *Vipārināma-dukkha*: All phenomena have the nature of “*anicca*”, impermanence, so they cannot satisfy permanently. Even happy feelings and desired emotions will change, dissolve and cease. One cannot control them or make them permanent.
3. *Saṅkhāra-dukkha*: All phenomena are conditioned by some other phenomena, which themselves are impermanent and conditioned. A network of conditions has to work harmoniously together in order to produce one phenomenon as result. One has no power or cannot control the resulting phenomenon which arises and vanishes according to its own natural laws.

Penetrating to this truth of *dukkha* in insight meditation (*vipassanā*) for whatever conditioned object one’s mind grasps, as well as for the subject, one’s own mind, leads to disenchantment and finally to neither like nor dislike but equanimity (*upekkhā*) towards these conditioned objects, which is called *saṅkhār’upekkhā-ñāṇa*, the knowledge of equanimity towards conditioned phenomena. This is the highest worldly insight a *vipassanā* meditator can achieve. After this, one is ready for the experience of *Nibbāna*, the unconditioned, which has none of the above mentioned attributes of *dukkha*.

The contemplation of suffering (*dukkhānupassanā*) is one of the three main methods in insight meditation. It discards desire through craving. *Nibbāna* first appears through the desireless aspect and the practice leads to desireless emancipation (*appaṇihitā-vimokkha*) with concentration as gateway to liberation.

Anatta – Non-self

The doctrine of *anatta* (Pāli) or *anātman* (Sanskrit) is the central, most profound and typical teaching of Buddhism and Abhidhamma.

Atta stands for “soul” or a permanent self, I, ego or intrinsic core. *An-atta* is the negation of such a soul or self. The Buddha’s *anatta* doctrine teaches that neither within the five aggregates (*khandha*) – which constitute a being and are bodily and mental phenomena – nor outside of them, can be found anything that could be regarded as a permanent, self-existing ego-entity or soul in the ultimate sense.

Anatta, non-self, non-I, non-ego, soullessness, impersonality is the third of the universal characteristics of existence and all phenomena, not only of conditioned phenomena (*saṅkhāra*), but even of the unconditioned *Nibbāna*. *Anatta* can be understood through penetrating the Buddhist doctrine of “Dependent Origination” (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), and in more detail and clarity through “Conditional

Relations" (*paṭṭhāna*)⁸, the seventh book of the *Abhidhamma*, which teaches the relations and connections of all mental and physical phenomena, which form a huge, complex net of causes, conditions, and effects. Everything one experiences happens because of conditions, and oneself, the subject including one's observing mind, is conditioned too. There is no inner core, self or soul that is not subject to this unstable conditionality, which would be permanent, reliable, to cling to and identify with. There are only void processes following their own natural laws according to conditions.

Anatta presents itself as uncontrollability. All things, phenomena, experiences are conditioned and we do not have the power to control these conditions. Therefore, the effect of these conditions, our experience or whatever phenomenon, is not under our control. For example, we cannot make happiness or love stay forever, or sadness, pain and decay disappear.

The contemplation of non-self (*anattānupassanā*) is one of the three main methods in insight meditation. It discards the clinging to a self. *Nibbāna* appears through the void aspect and the practice leads to emptiness emancipation (*suññatā-vimokkha*) with wisdom (*paññā*) as gateway to liberation.

Dhamma/dhammā

Dhamma (Pāli) or *Dharma* (Sanskrit) in singular generally denotes the Teaching of the Buddha, the truth or natural law he discovered, used for liberation, and taught.

Dhammā or *dharmā* in plural – according to context – usually point to phenomena, things, experiences, factors of existence, conditions, realities.

The conditioned phenomena (*saṅkhata dhammā*) have three characteristics:

1. Impermanence (*anicca*): They are impermanent and transitory phenomena, arising and immediately vanishing totally again.
2. Suffering (*dukkha*): Through their transience, instability and liability to suffering, they all have the nature of *dukkha*, that is, they are unsatisfactory, deficient, or insufficient.
3. Non-self (*anatta*): They are void of an "I" or any permanent entity which could be called I, ego, self or soul. The third characteristic applies to *Nibbāna*, the unconditioned *dhamma*, too.

Dhammā are ultimate realities (*paramattha dhammā*), the qualities of which are always the same, never change, while the *dhammā* themselves exist only momentarily. These realities, physical or mental, are exactly what one can experience directly with one of the six senses (including the mind). The observed object as well as the observing mind (subject) is transient and egoless. Only void phenomena happen and void processes run.

The *dhammā* are taught in greatest detail in the *Abhidhamma*, and they can be experienced, penetrated and intuitively known by insight meditation (*vipassanā*), which has the power to transform and liberate the mind.

⁸ See separate entry "Relations in Buddhism" (*Paṭṭhāna*)

Kamma

Kamma (Sanskrit: *Karma*), literally “action” is used by the Buddha only as “intentional action”, it might be a physical, verbal or mental action. “It is motivation (*cetanā*), o monks, what I call kamma.” (“*Cetanā’ham, bhikkhave, kammaṃ vadāmi*”, Collection of Gradual Discourses, Āṅguttara-Nikāya, AN VI. 63)

The mental factor (*cetasika*) *cetanā* is motivation, stimulation, intention or volition. Only *cetanā* associated with unwholesome or wholesome types of consciousness is *kamma*. While one performs intentional actions, a kammic energy is produced laying latent as a potential which can bring about its kammic result or fruit, called “*vipāka*”, later.

There are various types of kamma concerning its function, the priority of its ripening, the time of maturity, and the plane where it can produce its result. According to function, one of them is producing *kamma*, which produces a new life. Others can support, obstruct or destruct this producing *kamma*. *Kamma* is often compared with a seed which has the potential to produce only a species of the same kind, but only with present suitable conditions like water, earth, sun, etc. *Kamma* alone also cannot bear its effect, but it is the main cause of the kammic result. Results of kamma can be mental and physical.

Abhidhamma shows clearly that not all is *kamma*, and not all is *vipāka*, one’s fate. One performs new *kamma* during the impulsion stages (*javana*) of a mental process (*vīthi*) only⁹. Other stages, like eye consciousness are resultant (*vipāka*). Not everything is determined – there is no fatalism, although our “free will” is limited.

Vipassanā

Vipassanā (Pāli) or *vipaśyanā* (Sanskrit) means insight, clear seeing. It is a type of meditation (*bhāvanā*) unique to Buddhism. Generally, two types of meditation can be differentiated in the teaching of the Buddha: Concentration meditation (*samatha-bhāvanā*) and insight meditation (*vipassanā-bhāvanā*).

In *samatha*, concentration (*samādhi*) is favoured and the leading factor. Its aim is to deeply concentrate and calm down the mind by temporarily removing the mental hindrances, which leads to tranquillity, relaxation and mental peace. The highest state to achieve are the various meditative absorptions (*jhāna*), fine material or immaterial, or even supernormal power or knowledge (*abhiññā*). In contrast, in *vipassanā*, wisdom (*paññā*) is favoured and the leading factor. Its aim is nothing less than the irreversible cessation of suffering (*dukkha*), permanent liberation, and full enlightenment, the attainment of *Nibbāna*.

Passanā is seeing or in a figurative sense experiencing or knowing. The prefix *vi* means special, differently, in other ways. Therefore, *vipassanā* is seeing an object differently than normal. Normally we see or understand things wrongly, as concepts and see just the surface. But concepts are the objects for *samatha* meditation only. With *vipassanā* we penetrate into the real nature of whatever we

⁹ The mental process and its various stages as well as *kamma* are explained in Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha and its commentaries. See for example: Process of Consciousness and Matter, by Dr. Rewata Dhamma, Birmingham Buddhist Vihara, 2007 (<http://www.bvvt.org.uk/>), Triple Gem Publications. Free download: http://www.abhidhamma.com/Process_of_consciousness_and_matter.pdf

observe and see or, rather, understand things as they really are. *Vipassanā* needs a great deal of mindfulness (*sati*) to sharpen the mind and to be in the present moment directly with the respective experience. The object of *vipassanā* is always an ultimate reality (*paramattha-dhamma*), either physical or mental, never a concept (*paññatti*). Ultimate realities are phenomena which can be experienced directly and intuitively with our six senses (including the mind as sixth sense that perceives mental objects like memories, ideas, thoughts, etc.). In *vipassanā* we penetrate and know their individual characteristics that are typical for them, obvious and unambiguous, and by which one can differentiate and recognize them. This is in order to grasp one phenomenon clearly. The next step to insight is to penetrate to the universal characteristics of the object of ultimate reality, that means the nature which is common to all ultimate realities. These are impermanence (*anicca*), suffering or insufficiency (*dukkha*), and non-self (*anatta*).

A necessary foundation for *Vipassanā* is first the purification of morality (*sīla-visuddhi*), and second, the purification of mind (*citta-visuddhi*) through concentration. Only then the training of wisdom (*paññā*) or insight (*vipassanā*) can start. The practice of *vipassanā* is best described in the Buddha's discourse called "Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta" [Collection of Longer Discourses, Dīghanikāya, DN 22, and Middle Length Discourses, Majjhimanikāya, MN 10] and its commentaries. There, four foundations of mindfulness are taught and the respective contemplations, literally "repeated seeing" (*anupassanā*):

1. Contemplation of the body (*kāya*), or rather physical phenomena (*rūpa*)
2. Contemplation of feeling (*vedanā*)
3. Contemplation of the mind or consciousness (*citta*)
4. Contemplation of the *dhammā*, mental objects which are other ultimate phenomena not yet mentioned

In each of the four sections a variety of exercises is given. Like a refrain, it is always repeated, how and for what purpose to contemplate: "...with effort (*ātāpi*), clear comprehension (*sampajañña*), and mindful (*satima*) – overcoming attachment (*abhijjā*) and grief (*domanassa*) to the world", and "seeing the arising conditions, seeing the dissolving conditions, and both", "internally, externally, and both".

Before meditation really turns towards *vipassanā*, two preliminary insights are necessary:

1. Differentiation between mind (*nāma*) and matter (*rūpa*)
2. Discerning the conditions (*paccaya*) of their arising and ceasing

Following that insight, the characteristics of *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anatta* become apparent and have to be contemplated. Nine steps of insight knowledge follow¹⁰, leading through various experiences to disenchantment and equanimity. According to individual personality, one of the three characteristics becomes more significant and clear and should be contemplated intensively as *aniccānupassanā*, *dukkhānupassanā* or *anattānupassanā* respectively. When *Nibbāna* is experienced, it consequently will show up with the marks of being signless (*animitta*), desireless (*appaṇihitā*) or empty (*suññatā*). Accordingly, different kinds of emancipation (*vimokkha*) and liberation are taught.

Through slight differences in their appearance, altogether 18 types of contemplations are taught as "great insights (*mahā-vipassanā*)" in Paṭisambhidāmagga and Visuddhimagga.

¹⁰ See Path of Purity (Visuddhimagga), Path of Discrimination (Paṭisambhidāmagga), Abhidhammattha Sangaha, explanations of meditation masters like Mahāsi Sayadaw (who counts 14), and others.